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Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 USIE-00
INRE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 DHA-05 /076 W
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O 211655Z SEP 77
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8901
INFO USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY LUSAKA
AMEMBASSY MAPUTO
AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM
AMEMBASSY GABORONE
AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN
AMCONSUL DURBAN
AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PRETORIA 4939

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SA
SUBJECT: IMPLICATIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTIONS

1. SUMMARY: IN DECIDING ON GENERAL ELECTIONS PRIME MINISTER VORSTER IS APPARENTLY SEEKING A POPULAR MANDATE AS PART OF A MOBILIZATION STRATEGY TO DEAL WITH DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES. FOLLOWING IS THE MISSION'S PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE MOVE. END SUMMARY.

2. AS VORSTER INDICATED IN HIS SEPTEMBER 20 STATEMENT, HIS DECISION TO CALL GENERAL ELECTIONS FOR
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NOVEMBER 30 WAS MOTIVATED BY A COMPLEX OF FACTORS, INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC. ESSENTIALLY, THE ELECTIONS CAN BE SEEN AS PART OF THE GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY OF MOBILIZATION FOR THE DIFFICULT TIMES THAT LIE AHEAD. AN INCREASE IN THE NP POPULAR VOTE (55 PERCENT IN 1974) AND THE FURTHER EROSION OF THE ALREADY TOKEN OPPOSITION IN PARLIAMENT WOULD BE

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INTERPRETED AS A RALLYING OF THE WHITE POPULATION
BEHIND THE NP GOVERNMENT. VORSTER WOULD SEE SUCH A MANDATE
AS STRENGTHENING HIS HAND IN THE NEGOTIATIONS ON RHODESIA
AND NAMIBIA, ENCOURAGING THOSE IN THE WEST WHO WOULD
QUESTION SANCTIONS AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA, AND IF THE WORST
SHOULD COME, ENHANCING SOUTH AFRICA'S ABILITY TO
RESIST SUCH SANCTIONS.

3. DOMESTIC: THE DISARRAY OF THE OPPOSITION AND THE
CURRENT SIEGE PSYCHOLOGY PROVIDES A PROMISING OPPORTUNITY
FOR THE NATIONAL PARTY TO SEEK A POPULAR MANDATE FOR ITS
POLICIES. UNLESS THEY AGREE TO COOPERATE IN NOMINATING
CANDIDATES--AND THERE IS LITTLE TIME TO ARRANGE AGREEMENT--
THE FADING NRP AND THE LIBERAL PFP MAY CANCEL EACH OTHER
OUT IN SEVERAL NORMALLY OPPOSITION CONSTITUENCIES. THE
SOUTH AFRICAN PARTY, A SHADOW OF THE NP, MAY SLIP INTO
OBLIVION. POLITICAL OBSERVERS HERE ARE ALREADY PREDICTING
THAT THE NATS WILL PICK UP 4-10 SEATS. SUCH A VICTORY
WOULD ADD LITTLE TO THE NP'S CURRENT OVERWHELMING MAJORITY
(115 OUT OF 167 SEATS, NOT COUNTING SWA) BUT
WOULD BE A DEVASTATING BLOW TO THE OPPOSITION.

4. THERE IS ALSO A LATENT SYMPATHY AMONG ENGLISH-
SPEAKING WHITES GENERALLY FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S
RESISTANCE TO FOREIGN PRESSURES ON RHODESIA AND
NAMIBIA, AND TO A LESSER EXTENT ON DOMESTIC MATTERS. THIS
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BACKLASH ATTITUDE IS LIABLE TO REDOUND TO THE NP'S ADVANTAGE.
VORSTER HAS PROBABLY CALCULATED THAT IT IS WISER TO SEEK
A POPULAR MANDATE BEFORE A CRISIS BEGINS WHILE THE POPULAR
MOOD IS STILL SOMEWHAT DEFIANT AS WELL AS APPREHENSIVE.

5. VORSTER SEEKS A MANDATE FOR STRONG LEADERSHIP NOT
ONLY TO DEAL WITH FOREIGN PRESSURES BUT ALSO TO MANAGE
THE NATION'S MORE FUNDAMENTAL RACIAL PROBLEMS. A SUB-
STANTIAL NP VICTORY WOULD STRENGTHEN THE PM'S HAND IN
TIGHTENING COERCIVE CONTROLS--FOR EXAMPLE, OVER THE
PRESS--AS WELL AS IN MAKING "POSITIVE" CHANGES TO DAMPEN
THE UNREST. ALTHOUGH HE HAD NO DIFFICULTY IN WINNING APPROVAL
OF THE NEW CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSALS BY THE RECENT PARTY
PROVINCIAL CONGRESSES--ONLY ONE DELEGATE PERSISTED IN HIS
OPPOSITION--SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT VORSTER IS SEEKING
POPULAR ENDORSEMENT OF THE PLAN TO HEAD OFF RIGHT WING
CRITICISM WHEN IT IS IMPLEMENTED. ACCORDING TO THESE
OBSERVERS, THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION MAY
EVENTUALLY BE SEEN AS MORE FAR-REACHING THAN THE PARTY
MEMBERS HAVE BEEN LED TO BELIEVE. THE VOTERS IN EFFECT
WILL ALSO BE ENDORSING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CABINET
COMMITTEE WHICH IS REPORTEDLY TO MAKE A SERIES OF

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RECOMMENDATIONS AFFECTING PRIMARILY URBAN BLACKS.

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O 211655Z SEP 77
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PRETORIA 4939

6. A STRONG NP SHOWING WOULD ALSO SANCTION VORSTER'S EXPECTED ELEVATION TO THE STATE PRESIDENCY NEXT YEAR AND STRENGTHEN EVEN FURTHER HIS AUTHORITY WITHIN THE PARTY. MOREOVER, BY FURTHER DOWNGRADING THE REMAINS OF THE LIBERAL OPPOSITION, SOUTH AFRICA WILL, AS INFORMATION MINISTER CONNIE MULDER RECENTLY PREDICTED, MOVE "NORMALLY" TOWARD A ONE PARTY STATE--A CONDITION THAT WILL ALSO BE ENCOURAGED BY THE STRUCTURE OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION.

7. INTERNATIONAL: WE HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT VORSTER'S DECISION TO CALL ELECTIONS SUGGESTS A LESSENING OF HIS INTERESTS IN ARRIVING AT NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENTS ON RHODESIA OR NAMIBIA. HOWEVER, DURING THE CRITICAL NEXT TWO MONTHS WHEN
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THE PACKAGES ON RHODESIA AND NAMIBIA ARE TO BE FINALIZED, CAMPAIGN CONSIDERATION COULD INHIBIT THE SAG'S FLEXIBILITY. VORSTER DURING THIS PERIOD WILL BE LESS LIKELY TO PUT HIMSELF IN THE POSITION OF APPLYING PRESSURE AGAINST SMITH WHICH COULD BECOME VISIBLE OR WHICH SMITH MIGHT BE INCLINED TO SURFACE. IN NAMIBIA, VORSTER WILL BE MORE SENSITIVE TO CHARGES THAT HE HAS FAILED TO PROTECT THE INTERESTS OF THE WHITE POPULATION. THE EXTREMIST HNP, WHICH HAS ONLY A MINISCULE FOLLOWING (ABOUT 3 PERCENT IN 1974), APPEALS TO THE VOTER PRIMARILY IN TERMS OF SOFTNESS BY VORSTER ON PROTECTION OF THE POSITION OF WHITES. A CURRENT HNP SLOGAN IS "RHODESIA TODAY, SWA TOMORROW, THEN SOUTH AFRICA." VORSTER WILL, THEREFORE, BE PARTICULARLY ANXIOUS TO PROTECT THIS FLANK.

8. THE OTHER AREA WHERE WE SEE THE ELECTION HAVING A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE INTERNATIONAL FRONT IS SOUTH AFRICA'S RELATIONS WITH THE US. IN HIS PUBLIC EXPLANATION OF HIS DECISIONS TO HOLD ELECTIONS, VORSTER BEGAN WITH AN ATTACK ON "CERTAIN GOVERNMENTS" AND OTHERS WHO ARE "MEDDLING" IN SOUTH AFRICA'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS. DENUNCIATION OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE, ESPECIALLY FROM THE US, WILL LIKELY BE A MAJOR THEME IN THE NP CAMPAIGN. TWO NAT MP'S HAVE ALREADY TOLD US THAT WE CAN EXPECT HEAVY VERBAL ASSAULTS BY NP CANDIDATES.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ELECTIONS, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS
Control Number: n/a
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Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977PRETOR04939
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770343-0706
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From: PRETORIA
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Office: ACTION AF
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Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
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Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1188876
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: IMPLICATIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTIONS
TAGS: PFOR, PGOV, SA
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/e62dfd40-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
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